**Building Parent-Teacher Relationships**

By: American Federation of Teachers

Effective communication is essential for building school-family partnerships. It constitutes the foundation for all other forms of family involvement in education.

**Parent Benefits**

Positive parent-school communications benefit parents. The manner in which schools communicate and interact with parents affects the extent and quality of parents' home involvement with their children's learning. For example, schools that communicate bad news about student performance more often than recognizing students' excellence will discourage parent involvement by making parents feel they cannot effectively help their children.

Parents also benefit from being involved in their children's education by getting ideas from school on how to help and support their children, and by learning more about the school's academic program and how it works. Perhaps most important, parents benefit by becoming more confident about the value of their school involvement. Parents develop a greater appreciation for the important role they play in their children's education.

When communicating with parents, consider your remarks in relation to the three categories that influence how parents participate. For example, are you communicating about:

* Classroom learning activities?
* The child's accomplishments?
* How the parents can help at home with their child's learning?

**Student Benefits**

Substantial evidence exists showing that parent involvement benefits students, including raising their academic achievement. There are other advantages for children when parents become involved — namely, increased motivation for learning, improved behavior, more regular attendance, and a more positive attitude about homework and school in general.

**Teacher Benefits**

Research shows that parental involvement can free teachers to focus more on the task of teaching children. Also, by having more contact with parents, teachers learn more about students' needs and home environment, which is information they can apply toward better meeting those needs. Parents who are involved tend to have a more positive view of teachers, which results in improved teacher morale.

**Good Two-Way Communication**

Good two-way communication between families and schools is necessary for your students' success. Not surprisingly, research shows that the more parents and teachers share relevant information with each other about a student, the better equipped both will be to help that student achieve academically.

Opportunities for two-way communication include:

* Parent conferences
* Parent-teacher organizations or school community councils
* Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for parent review and comment
* Phone calls
* E-mail or school website

**Communication Strategies**

Personal contact, including conferences, home visits, telephone calls, and curriculum nights or open houses, seems to be the most effective form of communication and may be among the most familiar. However, the establishment of effective school-home communication has grown more complex as society has changed. The great diversity among families means that it is not possible to rely on a single method of communication that will reach all homes with a given message. It is essential that a variety of strategies, adapted to the needs of particular families and their schedules, be incorporated into an overall plan. Some strategies to consider include:

* Parent newsletters
* Annual open houses
* Curriculum nights
* Home visits (where applicable)
* Phone calls
* Annual school calendars
* Inserts in local newspapers
* Annual grandparents or "special persons" days
* Board of Education spokesperson or communications officer at PTA meetings
* Homework hotlines
* Annual field days
* Notices and handouts in local markets, clinics, churches, mosques, temples, or other gathering sites
* Website for the school
* Workshops for parents
* Communications that are focused on fathers as well as mothers

**Effective communication strategies involve:**

* Initiation: Teachers should initiate contact as soon as they know which students will be in their classroom for the school year. Contact can occur by means of an introductory phone call or a letter to the home introducing yourself to the parents and establishing expectations.
* Timeliness: Adults should make contact soon after a problem has been identified, so a timely solution can be found. Waiting too long can create new problems, possibly through the frustration of those involved.
* Consistency and frequency: Parents want frequent, ongoing feedback about how their children are performing with homework.
* Follow-through: Parents and teachers each want to see that the other will actually do what they say they will do.
* Clarity and usefulness of communication: Parents and teachers should have the information they need to help students, in a form and language that makes sense to them.

**Surprise a Parent**

Parents are not accustomed to hearing unsolicited positive comments from teachers about their children, especially in a phone call from the school. Imagine how you would feel, as a parent, if you were contacted by a teacher or the school principal and told that your son or daughter was doing well in school, or that your child had overcome a learning or behavior problem. When you make calls to share positive information with parents, be prepared for them to sound surprised-pleasantly surprised.

Research shows that school-home communication is greatly increased through personalized positive telephone contact between teachers and parents. Remember, when a phone call from school conveys good news, the atmosphere between home and school improves. When you have good news to share, why wait? Make the call and start a positive relationship with a parent.

**Phone Guidelines**

Sometimes, as a new teacher, it's difficult to make the first call to a parent or guardian. Preparing for the call will make it easier. Before making a call, write down the reasons for the call. One reason can be simply to introduce yourself to the parent or guardian. Here are several guidelines you can use as you prepare:

* Introduce yourself
* Tell the parents what their child is studying
* Invite the parents to an open house and/or other school functions
* Comment on their child's progress
* Inform them of their child's achievements (e.g., "Student of the Week")
* Inform them of their child's strengths or share an anecdote

To hear a sample teacher-parent phone call, visit [www.t-source.org](http://www.t-source.org" \t "_blank).

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